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NEA/FO FOR GRAY AND NEA/MAG FOR HOPKINS/HARRIS  
NSC FOR ABRAMS  
DRL FOR BARKS-RUGGLES

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/25/2017  
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KPAO](#) [KDEM](#) [TS](#)  
SUBJECT: TWO BOLD POLITICAL ARTICLES IN MAINSTREAM PRESS:  
COURAGEOUS JOURNALISTS PUSH THE RED LINES

REF: A. TUNIS 493

- [1](#)B. TUNIS 327
- [1](#)C. TUNIS 196
- [1](#)D. 06 TUNIS 2661
- [1](#)E. 06 TUNIS 501

CLASSIFIED BY: AMBASSADOR ROBERT F. GODEC FOR REASONS 1.4 (B) AND (D)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: IN A RECENT ONE-WEEK PERIOD, TWO ARTICLES FEATURING BOLD POLITICAL COMMENTARY APPEARED IN MAINSTREAM TUNISIAN FRENCH-LANGUAGE PRESS. THE ARTICLES, INTERVIEWS WITH OPPOSITION POLITICIANS, CONSTITUTED SOME OF THE MOST FRANK, OPEN DISCUSSION OF POLITICALLY SENSITIVE THEMES IN RECENT YEARS, AND WERE FOLLOWED BY SHORTER NEWS ITEMS ON OPPOSITION ACTIVITIES RARELY SEEN IN THE MAINSTREAM PRESS. WHILE TUNISIA'S PRESS FREEDOM SITUATION STILL RANKS AMONG THE LOWEST IN THE WORLD, THESE TWO ARTICLES REFLECT A RECENT TREND OF DYNAMISM AND INDEPENDENCE IN THE OTHERWISE CONTROLLED, LANGUID PRESS. END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) THE BOLDEST, MOST CRITICAL ARTICLE ON TUNISIAN POLITICS IN RECENT YEARS IN THE MAINSTREAM TUNISIAN PRESS APPEARED ON APRIL 2 IN FRENCH-LANGUAGE DAILY LE TEMPS. THE ARTICLE, AN INTERVIEW WITH MOKHTAR JELLALI, FORMER UNITED DEMOCRATIC UNION (UDU) OPPOSITION PARTY PARLIAMENTARIAN, LAWYER, AND HUSBAND OF OUTSPOKEN ACTIVIST/JOURNALIST NEZIJA REJIBA (PEN NAME "OM ZIED") CARRIED THE SUB-HEADING: "THE 'OFFICIAL' OPPOSITION PARTIES CONSIDER THEIR ROLE LIMITED TO UNRESERVED SUPPORT (FOR THE GOT)." IN THE ARTICLE, JELLALI IS QUOTED AS SAYING, "TRUE DELIVERANCE" FROM THE PROBLEM FACING OPPOSITION PARTIES, "WOULD CONSIST OF TOTAL POLITICAL REFORM, SINCERE AND RIGOROUS...AND WITH ADEQUATE ACCOMPANYING MEASURES, NOTABLY FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION..." CONTINUING, HE RESPONDS TO A QUESTION ABOUT THE 18 OCTOBER MOVEMENT (REF D), A DISPARATE GROUP OF OPPOSITION ACTIVISTS, WHICH HAS NEVER BEEN MENTIONED BY NAME IN THE MAINSTREAM PRESS, AND WHOSE MEMBERS ARE USUALLY REFERRED TO IN PRO-GOT PAPERS AS "TRAITORS." JELLALI, REFERRING TO THE MAIN DEMANDS OF THE 18 OCTOBER MOVEMENT SAID, "I CONSIDER THAT THE FIGHT FOR FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION, FREEDOM OF ASSOCIATION, AND AMNESTY IS AN EMINENTLY POLITICAL FIGHT."

[1](#)3. (SBU) THE APRIL 5-11 ISSUE OF WEEKLY FRENCH-LANGUAGE MAGAZINE REALITES FEATURED A COVER STORY ON TWO MEMBERS OF INDEPENDENT OPPOSITION PROGRESSIVE DEMOCRATIC PARTY, MOHAMED GOUMAIN AND FETHI TOUZRI, AND THEIR RECENTLY RELEASED SIXTY-PAGE TRACT ENTITLED "A POLITICAL VISION OF THE FUTURE." WHILE THE LANGUAGE OF THE INTERVIEW WAS NOT AS BOLD AS IN THE JELLALI EXCHANGE, GOUMAIN AND TOUZRI DID EXPRESS IDEAS RARELY PRINTED IN MAINSTREAM TUNISIAN PRESS. THE TWO MEMBERS OF THE PDP SAID, "IT IS IMPERATIVE THAT TUNISIA DEVELOP A MORE PARTICIPATORY SYSTEM." WHILE ECHOING JELLALI'S COMMENT

"CONSENSUAL POLITICAL OPPOSITION" IS NOT HEALTHY FOR TUNISIA, GOUMAIN AND TOUZRI SAID THAT THE PDP, AND OTHER OPPOSITION GROUPS, SHOULD SEEK DIALOGUE WITH THE GOT INSTEAD OF PURSUING A MORE ADVERSARIAL POLICY -- A VIEWPOINT NOT SHARED BY A MAJORITY OF PDP MEMBERS, ACCORDING TO THE ARTICLE. EXAMPLES OF PARTICULARLY BOLD QUOTES INCLUDE: "THE PROJECT OF CONSENSUAL DEMOCRACY, OPEN ONLY TO POLITICAL PARTIES CLOSE TO POWER, HAS PROVEN ITS LIMITS." ALSO, RESPONDING TO A QUESTION ON TERRORISM: "THE AUTHORITIES HAVE A RESPONSIBILITY TOWARDS ALL TYPES OF YOUTH, INCLUDING THOSE THAT ARE ATTRACTED TO RELIGION. THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE ON RELIGION HAS SHOWN ITSELF INCAPABLE OF INCLUDING THESE YOUTH." ON FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: "IT IS NOT NECESSARY TO HAVE FORMAL STRUCTURES TO HAVE DEBATE (ON POLITICAL PARTICIPATION). A FREER PRESS CAN PLAY THIS ROLE VERY WELL."

14. (U) IN THE WEEKS FOLLOWING THESE ARTICLES, SHORTER NEWS ITEMS CONCERNING INDEPENDENT HUMAN RIGHTS GROUPS AND OPPOSITION PARTIES ALSO RAN IN LE TEMPS, ITS ARABIC-LANGUAGE SISTER PAPER AS-SABAH, AND REALITIES. ALSO, OUT OF THE NORM FOR MAJOR PRINT MEDIA, ARTICLES IN LE TEMPS AND AS-SABAH COVERED A PDP PRESS CONFERENCE CONCERNING DEMANDS FROM THE LANDLORD FOR THE PARTY TO LEAVE ITS TUNIS HEADQUARTERS (REF A). REALITIES RAN A SHORT ITEM ABOUT EMBATTLED TUNISIAN HUMAN RIGHTS LEAGUE (LTDH) DIRECTOR MOKHTAR TRIFI (REF E) WHO WAS ABLE TO RENEW HIS PASSPORT ONLY AFTER A LENGTHY DELAY, WHICH THE LTDH ALLEGED WAS AN ATTEMPT TO PREVENT HIS TRAVEL OVERSEAS TO SUPPORT THE CANDIDATURE OF LTDH VICE-PRESIDENT SOUHEIR BELHASSEN FOR THE PRESIDENCY OF THE INTERNATIONAL FEDERATION FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (FIDH). (NOTE: BELHASSEN WAS ELECTED PRESIDENT OF THE FIDH ON APRIL 24. END NOTE.)

10. (C) RIDHA KEFI (PROTECT), A PROMINENT JOURNALIST WHOSE ATTEMPT TO PUBLISH AN INDEPENDENT NEWS MAGAZINE WAS BLOCKED BY THE GOT (REF B), IN ANSWER TO POLOFFS QUESTION, SAID THAT THERE HAD BEEN NO "GREEN LIGHT" FROM THE GOT TO PRINT COURAGEOUS JOURNALISTS PUSH THE RED LINES THESE MORE DARING ARTICLES. KEFI WRITES OFTEN FOR LE TEMPS, AND SAID THAT HE AND A CADRE OF LIKE-MINDED JOURNALISTS IN LE TEMPS AND AS-SABAH MADE A CONSCIOUS DECISION TO WRITE ARTICLES ON TRADITIONALLY SENSITIVE TOPICS. KEFI'S EDITORIALS FOLLOWING THE DECEMBER 2006/JANUARY 2007 "SALAFIST" INCIDENTS (REF C) HIGHLIGHTED THE CONTINUING TERRORIST THREAT IN TUNISIA, AND EDITORIALS IN REALITES HAVE CALLED FOR GREATER GOT OPENNESS AND INFORMATION SHARING ABOUT THE ATTACKS. KEFI SAID THAT INDEPENDENT JOURNALISM IN TUNISIA IS A "PUSH-PUSH GAME" -- THE MORE DARING JOURNALISTS WILL PUSH THE BOUNDARIES UNTIL THE POINT WHERE THE GOT PUSHES BACK. KEFI SAID THAT LE TEMPS AND AS-SABAH ARE ON THE FOREFRONT OF THIS WAVE, AND THAT REALITES USUALLY FOLLOWS THESE TWO PAPERS, ALBEIT LESS BOLDLY. (NOTE: THE REALITES PDP PIECE WAS INDEED LESS PROVOCATIVE THAN THE JELLALI INTERVIEW IN LE TEMPS. END NOTE.) KEFI SAID THAT LE TEMPS/AS-SABAH HAD NOT WITNESSED A REPEAT OF THE DIFFICULTIES THE PUBLISHING HOUSE HAD ENDURED EARLIER IN THE YEAR WHEN THE GOT SENT A STRONG SIGNAL TO LIMIT PROVOCATIVE ARTICLES BY CANCELING MUCH-NEEDED GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING.

15. (C) DEFI/SARL, THE COMPANY THAT OWNS THE PRINTING PRESSES THAT RUN LE TEMPS/AS-SABAH HAS RECENTLY SIGNED A MEPI SMALL GRANT TO CONDUCT FOUR ROUNDTABLES ON ECONOMIC/DEMOCRATIC REFORM THEMES -- THE RESULTS OF WHICH WILL BE PUBLISHED IN A SPECIAL INSERT IN THE TWO PAPERS. KEFI, WHO IS PARTLY BEHIND THE GRANT REQUEST, TOLD POLOFF THAT LIKE THE ARTICLES, THE MEPI GRANT IS ALSO AN ATTEMPT TO PUSH GOT RED-LINES. (HE ADDED THAT BY PARTNERING WITH INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS AND DIPLOMATIC MISSIONS HE AND HIS LIKE-MINDED COLLEAGUES HOPED FOR SOME MEASURE OF "PROTECTION" SHOULD THE GOT PUSH COME TO SHOVE.)

16. (C) COMMENT: WHILE TUNISIA'S PRESS FREEDOM SITUATION STILL CERTAINLY RANKS AMONG THE LOWEST IN THE WORLD, THESE RECENT ARTICLES REFLECT A RECENT TREND OF DYNAMISM AND INDEPENDENCE IN THE OTHERWISE CONTROLLED, LANGUID PRESS. WE WILL HAVE TO WAIT AND SEE IF THE GOT PUSHES BACK. IN THE MEANTIME, KEFI AND HIS COLLEAGUES SAY THEY WILL LEAD THE SLOW, CAREFUL DRIVE TOWARDS A MORE INDEPENDENT, AND THEY CLAIM, OBJECTIVE AND MODERATE PRESS -- WHICH THEY RIGHTLY SEE AS CRITICAL TO FURTHER POLITICAL PROGRESS AND THE FIGHT AGAINST EXTREMISM IN

TUNISIA. END COMMENT.  
GODEC